DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 886 UD 033 625

AUTHOR Ellison, Constance M.; Boykin, A. Wade; Towns, Donna Penn; Stokes, Almeta

TITLE Classroom Cultural Ecology: The Dynamics of Classroom Life in Schools Serving Low-Income African American Children.

INSTITUTION Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Baltimore, MD.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO CRESPAR-R-44
PUB DATE 2000-05-00
NOTE 41p.
CONTRACT R-117-D40005
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.csos.jhu.edu.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; Classification; Discipline; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Focus Groups; *Low Income Groups; Protocol Analysis; *Teacher Characteristics; Teaching Methods; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Cultural Ecology

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to gain descriptive insights into the routines, practices, perceptions, and interactions that make up the everyday ecology of classrooms serving African American children from low-income backgrounds. A taxonomic scheme was devised for examining the realities of what occurs in classrooms. The taxonomy identifies five dimensions of classroom life: (1) social/psychological relations; (2) technical core of instruction; (3) physical structure and organizational routines; (4) discipline and classroom management; and (5) attitudes, perceptions, and expectations. Protocols were obtained from classroom observations in 21 elementary classrooms, in which 52 observations yielded 150 hours of direct observation in grades 1 through 6. Thirty-seven students from these classrooms participated in focus groups. Findings show the importance of the teachers' personality and early morning demeanor in setting classroom tone and the usefulness of group instruction in averting disciplinary problems. Also highlighted were the teachers' tone of voice and nonverbal forms of disciplinary and management techniques. Students in focus groups showed generally positive attitudes toward their teachers, and their responses demonstrated the importance of teachers' language and communication styles. Results also show that cultural themes associated with mainstream culture were more prevalent in the classrooms than cultural themes associated with Afro-cultural ideas. The results have implications for the development of a more extensive and inclusive effort to describe the experience of low-income African American elementary school students. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 442 886

CRESPAR

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FUNDED BY
OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT
US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY & HOWARD UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UD033625

CLASSROOM CULTURAL ECOLOGY

The Dynamics of Classroom Life in Schools Serving Low-Income African American Children

Constance M. Ellison
A. Wade Boykin
Donna Penn Towns
Almeta Stokes

Howard University

Report No. 44

May 2000

Published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), supported as a national research and development center by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education (R-117-D40005). The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OERI, and no official endorsement should be inferred. An on-line version of this report is available at our web site: www.csos.jhu.edu.

CRESPAR TECHNICAL REPORTS

1996

1. *The Talent Development High School: Essential Components*—V. LaPoint, W. Jordan, J.M. McPartland, D.P. Towns
2. *The Talent Development High School: Early Evidence of Impact on School Climate, Attendance, and Student Promotion*—J.M. McPartland, N. Legters, W. Jordan, E.L. McDill
3. *The Talent Development Middle School: Essential Components*—S. Madhere, D.J. Mac Iver
4. *The Talent Development Middle School: Creating a Motivational Climate Conducive to Talent Development in Middle Schools: Implementation and Effects of Student Team Reading*—D.J. Mac Iver, S.B. Plank
5. *Patterns of Urban Student Mobility and Local School Reform: Technical Report*—D. Kerbow
6. *Scaling Up: Lessons Learned in the Dissemination of Success for All*—R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden
7. *School-Family-Community Partnerships and the Academic Achievement of African American, Urban Adolescents*—M.G. Sanders
8. *Asian American Students At Risk: A Literature Review*—S.-F. Siu

1997

9. *Reducing Talent Loss: The Impact of Information, Guidance, and Actions on Postsecondary Enrollment*—S.B. Plank, W.J. Jordan
10. *Effects of Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition on Students Transitioning from Spanish to English Reading*—M. Calderón, R. Hertz-Lazarowitz, G. Ivory, R.E. Slavin
11. *Effective Programs for Latino Students in Elementary and Middle Schools*—O.S. Fashola, R.E. Slavin, M. Calderón, R. Duran
12. *Detracking in a Racially Mixed Urban High School*—R. Cooper
13. *Building Effective School-Family-Community Partnerships in a Large Urban School District*—M.G. Sanders
14. *Volunteer Tutoring Programs: A Review of Research on Achievement Outcomes*—B.A. Wasik
15. *Working Together to Become Proficient Readers: Early Impact of the Talent Development Middle School's Student Team Literature Program*—D.J. Mac Iver, S.B. Plank, R. Balfanz
16. *Success for All: Exploring the Technical, Normative, Political, and Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Scaling Up*—R. Cooper, R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden
17. *MathWings: Early Indicators of Effectiveness*—N.A. Madden, R.E. Slavin, K. Simons
18. *Parental Involvement in Students' Education During Middle School and High School*—S. Catsambis, J.E. Garland

1998

19. *Success for All/Exito Para Todos: Effects on the Reading Achievement of Students Acquiring English*—R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden
20. *Implementing a Highly Specified Curricular, Instructional, and Organizational School Design in a High-Poverty, Urban Elementary School: Three Year Results*—B. McHugh, S. Stringfield
21. *The Talent Development Middle School: An Elective Replacement Approach to Providing Extra Help in Math—The CATAMA Program (Computer and Team-Assisted Mathematics Acceleration)*—D.J. Mac Iver, R. Balfanz, S.B. Plank
22. *School-Family-Community Partnerships in Middle And High Schools: From Theory to Practice*—M.G. Sanders, J.L. Epstein
23. *Sources of Talent Loss Among High-Achieving Poor Students*—W.J. Jordan, S.B. Plank
24. *Review of Extended-Day and After-School Programs and Their Effectiveness*—O.S. Fashola

1998 (cont'd)

25. *Teachers' Appraisals of Talent Development Middle School Training, Materials, and Student Progress*—E. Useem
26. *Exploring the Dynamics of Resilience in an Elementary School*—S.M. Nettles, F.P. Robinson
27. *Expanding Knowledge of Parental Involvement in Secondary Education: Effects on High School Academic Success*—S. Catsambis
28. *Socio-Cultural and Within-School Factors That Effect the Quality of Implementation of School-Wide Programs*—R. Cooper

1999

29. *How Students Invest Their Time Out of School: Effects on School Engagement, Perceptions of Life Chances, and Achievement*—W.J. Jordan, S.M. Nettles
30. *Disseminating Success For All: Lessons for Policy and Practice*—R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden
31. *Small Learning Communities Meet School-to-Work: Whole-School Restructuring for Urban Comprehensive High Schools*—N.E. Legters
32. *Family Partnerships with High Schools: The Parents' Perspective*—M.G. Sanders, J.L. Epstein, L. Connors-Tadros
33. *Grade Retention: Prevalence, Timing, and Effects*—N. Karweit
34. *Preparing Educators for School-Family-Community Partnerships: Results of a National Survey of Colleges and Universities*—J.L. Epstein, M.G. Sanders, L.A. Clark
35. *How Schools Choose Externally Developed Reform Designs*—A. Datnow
36. *Roots & Wings: Effects of Whole-School Reform on Student Achievement*—R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden
37. *Teacher Collaboration in a Restructuring Urban High School*—N.E. Legters
38. *The Child First Authority After-School Program: A Descriptive Evaluation*—O.S. Fashola
39. *MathWings: Effects on Student Mathematics Performance*—N.A. Madden, R.E. Slavin, K. Simons
40. *Core Knowledge Curriculum: Three-Year Analysis of Implementation and Effects in Five Schools*—B. McHugh, S. Stringfield
41. *Success for All/Roots & Wings: Summary of Research on Achievement Outcomes*—R.E. Slavin, N.A. Madden

2000

42. *The Role of Cultural Factors in School Relevant Cognitive Functioning: Synthesis of Findings on Cultural Contexts, Cultural Orientations, and Individual Differences*—A.W. Boykin, C.T. Bailey
43. *The Role of Cultural Factors in School Relevant Cognitive Functioning: Description of Home Environmental Factors, Cultural Orientations, and Learning Preferences*—A.W. Boykin, C.T. Bailey
44. *Classroom Cultural Ecology: The Dynamics of Classroom Life in Schools Serving Low-Income African American Children*—C.M. Ellison, A.W. Boykin, D.P. Towns, A. Stokes
45. *An "Inside" Look at Success for All: A Qualitative Study of Implementation and Teaching and Learning*—A. Datnow, M. Castellano
46. *Lessons for Scaling Up: Evaluations of the Talent Development Middle School's Student Team Literature Program*—S.B. Plank, E. Young (in press)
47. *A Two-Way Bilingual Program: Promise, Practice, and Precautions*—M. Calderón, Argelia Carreon (in press)
48. *Four Models of School Improvement: Successes and Challenges in Reforming Low-Performing, High-Poverty Title I Schools*—G.D. Borman, L. Rachuba, A. Datnow, M. Alberg, M. Mac Iver, S. Stringfield, S. Ross (in press)

The Center

Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life. Yet far too many children, especially those from poor and minority families, are placed at risk by school practices that are based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive high-expectations instruction while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures. The sorting perspective must be replaced by a "talent development" model that asserts that all children are capable of succeeding in a rich and demanding curriculum with appropriate assistance and support.

The mission of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) is to conduct the research, development, evaluation, and dissemination needed to transform schooling for students placed at risk. The work of the Center is guided by three central themes — ensuring the success of all students at key development points, building on students' personal and cultural assets, and scaling up effective programs — and conducted through research and development programs in the areas of early and elementary studies; middle and high school studies; school, family, and community partnerships; and systemic supports for school reform, as well as a program of institutional activities.

CRESPAR is organized as a partnership of Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, and supported by the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (At-Risk Institute), one of five institutes created by the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination and Improvement Act of 1994 and located within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) at the U.S. Department of Education. The At-Risk Institute supports a range of research and development activities designed to improve the education of students at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain descriptive insights into the routines, practices, perceptions, and interactions that constitute the everyday ecology of classrooms serving African American children from low-income backgrounds. The underlying theory guiding the study is that learning does not happen in a vacuum, but takes place in a broad context composed of a myriad of factors present in the classroom.

A taxonomic conceptual scheme for examining the realities of what is occurring in classrooms was devised. The taxonomy identifies five dimensions of classroom life: (1) social/psychological relations, (2) technical core of instruction, (3) physical structure and organizational routines, (4) discipline and classroom management, and (5) attitudes, perceptions, and expectations. In this work, protocols were obtained from direct classroom observations of twenty-one (21) elementary school classrooms located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Fifty-two observation periods yielded one hundred fifty (150) hours of direct observations. These direct observations were equally dispersed among grades one through six. Thirty-seven (37) students from these classrooms participated in focus group discussions.

Numerous findings emerged from the study. In the social/psychological category, the teacher's personality and early morning demeanor were major factors in setting the tone for the classroom on any given day. In the technical core of instruction category, the teacher's use of group instructional activities led to fewer disciplinary problems than during individual learning activities. In the structure of the learning environment category, there was an abundance of daily routines, rules, and rituals that students must be familiar with and obey or they are disciplined. In the area of classroom management and discipline, the teacher's tone of voice was associated with the form of these activities deployed. Teachers with positive tones tended to use indirect and cooperative forms of commands, while those who did not tended to give orders in a more direct and authoritative fashion. Non-verbal modes of disciplinary and management techniques were often observed. These included turning lights off and on, standing in silence until students settled down, and a time-out routine.

Regarding perception of the learning environment, focus group discussions revealed some interesting findings. Students perceived their classroom environment to be very positive. Students also perceived their teachers as people who wanted them to succeed in the classroom and in life. Students also engaged in discussions regarding their engagement in group work, the need to follow rules and regulations, their relationship with their teacher and other students, and their teacher's use of praise and reward.

The use of language and communication styles also played an important role in the classroom. The use of sarcasm, criticism, and negative language by the teacher was also duplicated by the students. In addition, some teachers were found to engage in code switching between Standard English and Black English. Despite their engagement in code switching, teachers were inconsistent in their practice of and their level of tolerance for this practice by students.

Results also show that the cultural themes associated with mainstream cultural ethos such as individualism, competition, and bureaucracy orientation are more prevalent than those associated with Afro-cultural themes such as communalism, movement, and verve. In addition, it was observed that the mainstream themes are more likely to be manifested in teacher initiated expressions than in student initiated expressions. Subsequently, when Afro-cultural themes are manifested, they are overwhelmingly initiated by students.

Results from this study have implications for the development of a more extensive and more inclusive effort to describe the actual classroom experience of low-income African American elementary school children.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank and honor John Hollifield for his invaluable assistance and professionalism. We want to express our gratitude to the many principals, teachers, and most of all the young students who made this research possible. Also, to our graduate research associates, Brooke Wilson, Oronde Miller, and Yeshashwork Kibour, we appreciate your hard work and your continued support.

Introduction

The Classroom Cultural Ecology Project seeks to gain insight into the daily routines of classroom life in schools that serve low-income African American children with a view to producing rich, descriptive information that can serve as a knowledge base for optimal implementation of reforms. The premise underlying the study is that through direct observation of daily activities in classrooms and interviews with teachers and students, we will be able to present a holistic picture encompassing social/psychological relationships, pedagogy, rules and routines, discipline, and perceptions of the participants. When this picture is further perceived through linguistic and cultural filters, an unprecedented understanding of the factors that impact learning for these students will emerge.

A review of the extant literature in the area of classroom ecology reveals that, in reform efforts, little attention has been paid to the actualities of classroom life, particularly as they relate to the classrooms of low-income African American children (Fuller & Clarke, 1994; Tharp, 1989). In addition, in prevailing classroom ecologies, little attention has been given to the cultural substratum underlying these classrooms (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This project seeks to fill the void specifically by asking the following questions:

1. What is the technical core of instruction upon which achievement typically is predicated for low-income African American children?
2. What social and psychological characteristics do the children and their teachers typically display?
3. What is the typical form of discipline, incentive, and feedback that teachers employ?
4. How are classrooms physically organized and what are the structures of daily classroom life?
5. What are the various perceptions of classroom life held by teachers and students?

In seeking answers to this set of questions, we believe that a complex, multidimensional depiction of classroom life will emerge.

The Classroom Cultural Ecology research team is examining current classroom practices in order to develop penetrating, systematic, descriptive insights into the daily routines of classroom life in schools serving African-American children from low-income backgrounds. A specific focus is placed on discerning the social, psychological, pedagogical, and cultural fabrics and dynamics of classroom life. Our aim is to develop a cogent understanding of the complex classroom climate characteristics that both teachers and students

face in the classroom and how these characteristics shape their behavior and mode of operation.

The research team has been looking at how classrooms work, and what classroom characteristics exert their influence and supply the foundation that underlies instructional delivery, discipline, learning/cognition, and motivation of low-income African-American students. We have pursued this task in the absence of inferential hypothesis testing, and without the goal of prescribing what practices and procedures are most appropriate for the effective schooling of this population of children. One very basic question that has guided our efforts is "what is actually going on?" We argue that in order to develop sustained interventions that can be implemented by way of school reform, especially interventions that are sensitive to the needs and demands of African-American children, we must know what is currently in place. As Boykin and Miller (1997) state, "prescriptions for reform must be prescribed on adequate descriptions of existing conditions."

The research begins with a taxonomic conceptual scheme for examining the realities of what is occurring in actual classrooms. Specifically, in examining the literature in this area, five sectors of classroom life and their corresponding sub-dimensions were formulated which comprehensively capture classroom cultural ecology. This taxonomy identifies five dimensions of classroom life: (1) social/psychological, (2) technical core of instruction, (3) structure of the learning environment, (4) discipline and classroom management, and (5) perception of the learning environment.

Based on these dimensions, the research team developed a coding scheme that examines not only the general taxonomy, but also two separate yet mutually interactive constructs — Language and Cultural. Because the focus of the study was on classrooms that serve low-income African American children, the impact of mainstream, Anglo-American culture versus the culture that the children bring into the classroom loomed high and became an area for analysis in all the classroom dimensions mentioned above. Equally as pervasive were language and communication styles.

Culture and Fundamental Cultural Themes

Efforts to create effective classroom environments for children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be based, in part, on knowledge about the role that culture plays in shaping children's learning opportunities and experiences at school and within the

classroom. Thus, as children come to school, they bring culturally informed knowledge, values, and skills to the classroom environment and rely on them as a reference for interpreting new experiences. All children enter the learning environment with this cultural capital. However, it has been well documented that the mass urban education model in American public schools, in particular, was conceived in large part to bring the values and behaviors of certain immigrant children into conformity with Anglo cultural ethos (Tyack, 1974; Kaestle, 1983). Boykin and Miller (1997) argue that this has resulted in attempts to bring school children into conformity with such fundamental cultural themes as interpersonal competition, individual autonomy, materialism, and the priority of cognition over affect. Fundamental cultural themes are enduring themes that speak to philosophical foundations for coding reality and attaching meaning to life. These themes lead to a set of core intrinsic values which are blueprints for living.

There is presently little consideration in American classrooms for the cultural capital and integrity of children of diverse cultural groups. Gordon (1980) argues that children with cultural and linguistic capital differing from the capital that schools disseminate are likely to have fewer positive experiences which enhance their opportunities for success in school than children entering school with cultural capital that is more compatible with that prescribed by the school system. Many scholars who have researched and theorized about this issue have concluded that there are possible pedagogical and motivational consequences that may arise when educational institutions, classroom lessons, and other classroom routines and activities are culturally organized and conducted in a manner that may not incorporate the values and cultural realities of children from culturally divergent groupings. It stands to reason that students who attend classes that are geared only to the majority culture, where no recognition is given to the legitimacy of other cultures, are likely to feel isolated and inferior, and may disassociate themselves from the schooling experience or at least feel disconnected from classroom learning activities.

It is crucial, then, especially for teachers, to identify those aspects of children's cultural backgrounds that have the greatest relevance for children's adjustment, motivation, and learning within the classroom. One of the challenges that this poses to educators involves striking a balance between demonstrating respect and understanding for culturally divergent students and preparing these students to participate successfully in formal school settings. A starting point for addressing this dilemma involves understanding how children's cultural backgrounds affect the skills, knowledge, and expectations that they bring to the classroom. We in the Classroom Cultural Ecology project have been looking diligently at this issue as we look inside classrooms serving African American children from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, we are looking very closely into classroom life in terms of the prevalence of

certain fundamental cultural themes (Afro-cultural and mainstream) and the classroom dynamics informed by these themes. We are looking at fundamental cultural themes such as:

Afro-cultural Themes

Movement

... has to do with a premium placed on the interwoven mosaic of movement expressiveness, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm.

Verve

... has to do with a receptiveness of relatively high levels of physical or sensate stimulation.

Communalism

... involves the fundamental interdependence of people.

Mainstream Cultural Themes

Individualism

... refers to one's disposition toward fundamental autonomy, independence, individual recognition, and solitude.

Competition

... the notion that one's focus is on doing better than others; in order for a participant to succeed, others must fail in some fashion.

Bureaucracy Orientation

... concerned with the strict adherence to structured rules and regulations with a policy against deviation from sanctioned procedures.

Afrocultural themes are thus hypothesized to be African in origin and to have been maintained and transmitted across generations in communities and families of African descent throughout the world. Thus they will find some level of expression in the lives of many African-American children. Mainstream cultural themes are said to be principally of European and North American origin and likely to permeate the formed institutions of mainstream American society.

Fundamental themes mediate and guide children's perceptions, values, and behaviors in the process of cognitive development. As Boykin (1994) has stated, both sets of themes may likely find expression in the lives of African American children. But given the central place of Afro-cultural themes in many African American communities and family activities, they have special developmental potency for many African American children, particularly those

of low income background who are more likely to be more distanced from mainstream values and practices.

Language and Communications Styles

The dominant role that language plays in the classroom and its effect on the teaching/learning process made it another factor that required close examination, if we were to understand the ecology of the classrooms under study. Language plays a dominant role in classrooms not only as a part of the culture that is transmitted, but as the transmitter of culture, its traditional knowledge, values, and norms (Wolcott, 1976). Comparing the classroom to a communication system, where there is a flow of messages between the teacher (as transmitter) and pupils (the receivers), Henry (1963) alludes to the classroom's "inherent tendency to generate noise... the teacher's tone of voice and volume, shuffling feet, the pencil sharpener." These noises, he contends, are the unconscious messages that are the "most significant cultural learnings" (1962:289). In our protocols, we are made keenly aware of constant interruptions from the P.A. system, noises from the hallways, students' whispers, and so forth, and that tolerance for such noise varies among teachers and students.

Accepting that most teaching takes place through communication, it is imperative that those of us interested in school reform consider how that communication system works: what is being said, to whom it is being said, when and how it is being said. We know that in order for communication to take place between two or more persons, there are certain shared cultural understandings that must be present. Communication involves not only a common phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic knowledge base; there is a pragmatic aspect, one that cannot be found in a dictionary or grammar book. A mutual understanding of such things as how to speak in a given situation (appropriateness), when to speak (turn-taking), and the sources of the speakers' referents (presuppositions) form a part of pragmatics. As Burling (1992) states, "Pragmatics concerns itself with the speaker's expectation of what the hearer is already aware of" (p. 245). It is in this area of expectations and presuppositions that miscommunication can most subtly occur.

Black English Vernacular, a language variety favored by many urban Black youths, is often cited as the cause for Black students' difficulties in school (Baratz & Shuy, 1969). Orlando Taylor (1988) states that this variety is denigrated by middle-class teachers and causes miscommunication between student and teacher resulting in Black student school failure. Our mission in looking at Black English Vernacular was not to enter the current national debade over the use of ebonics in the classroom, but to describe the use of the vernacular as we found it in the classrooms in our study.

Heath (1978) has pointed out that "teacher talk" is a unique "register" with its own grammatical structure. Imperatives are often stated as interrogatives, indirect commands, and simple declarative statements in an attempt to mask control and the reality of teacher as stranger rather than primary caregiver. Common examples of this overly polite language are "Excuse me," and "May I have your attention, please?" Heath (1983) has also pointed out the disparity between the teachers' ways of asking questions and the ways parents in minority and working class homes ask questions, and has shown how this difference negatively affects the learning process for children from these homes. We have documented instances of this teacher talk in our observation protocols.

The inequality of power inherent in the teacher/student relationship as it is structured in our culture reveals itself in the language used in the classroom (Heath, 1978, 1983; Casden, 1974; Manke, 1990). As Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and later Mehan (1979), so emphatically pointed out, at least two-thirds of the conversation in lessons is taken up by the teacher, only one-third by students. They pointed out that this phenomenon was due largely to the nature of lessons which generally involve a tri-partite pattern of discourse: the teacher *initiates* a question, a student *responds* to the question, and the teacher *evaluates* that response. The formula has become known as the I-R-E theory. Flanders (1970), in his study of teacher/student interactions, had also pointed out the predominance of teacher talk over student talk in the classroom. Out of ten interaction analysis categories, Flanders gives only two categories to student talk.

Earlier in this report, mention was made of the powerful role that culturally-shaped patterns of transmitting knowledge have on the ways in which children learn to learn. We though it important, therefore, to examine the cultural assumptions underlying the language used to transmit that knowledge.

LaBelle (1972) and others have pointed out that the essence of cultural transmission is a communication. The interplay between culture and language has convincingly been documented. Whorf postulated that "we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (1965:213). Korzbyski points out that "every language reflects in its own structure that of the world as assumed by those who evolved the language" (1951:22). He further states that "we take the structure of our own habitual language so much for granted..., it is sometimes difficult to realize how differently people with other language structures view the world" (1951:22). Gramsci (1988) emphatically states how those in power use language to disguise the extent of their oppression which often leads to complicity by the oppressed in their own oppression.

Applying these theories to the context of low-income African American students in the classroom and teachers with different socio-economic and sometimes racial backgrounds (whose language could reflect different cultural experiences from those of their students), classroom language was analyzed utilizing Boykin's schemata of Afro-cultural versus mainstream cultural themes. Our lenses were particularly focused on teachers' ways of talking, as they reflected those cultural themes. It is imperative that teachers become aware of the extent to which they reinforce cultural themes through the language they use and the possibility of misunderstanding on the part of students who use language in different ways reflecting different cultural assumptions.

General Methodology

Our examination of the cultural ecology of classrooms that serve African American children from low-income backgrounds was carried out through the analysis of classroom observations, analysis of videotapes of classrooms, and the analysis of interviews with student focus groups.

Classroom Observations

Participants

Fifty-two (52) classroom observation sessions, totaling 150 hours of direct observations, were conducted in classrooms serving African-American children from low-income backgrounds. Classrooms were evenly dispersed across grades one through six. Twelve (12) classroom observers were trained to conduct real-time descriptive depictions of what transpired in classrooms over a three-hour period either in the morning or in the afternoon. Following the training sessions, the observers were placed (unobtrusively) in twenty-one (21) classrooms in six (6) participating schools located in an urban area in the Northeastern part of the country. There were twenty-six (26) morning sessions and twenty-six (26) afternoon sessions observed. There were two (2) observers per observation period.

Coding of Protocols

Using insights gained in the direct observations and previous literature in the field as a guide, five dimensions, or categories, of classroom life were identified and coded on three levels: General, Culture, and Language. The five categories were: (1) social/psychological, (2) technical core of instruction, (3) structure of the learning environment, (4) discipline and classroom management, and (5) perception of the learning environment.

Social/Psychological. This category covers the social and psychological characteristics of the students and their classroom teachers. Included in this category are interactions between the teacher and the student(s) which are not directly related to instruction in specific subject areas or to discipline. The personality of the teacher and his/her personal appearance, demeanor, manner of speaking, and tolerance for movement, noise, and so forth are examples of the qualities that would be noted here. Students' ways of interacting with the teacher and with one another as well as their personal appearance, similarly fall into this category. Idiosyncratic behavior might justifiably be noted here as it may set a tone for the overall culture of the classroom (e.g., a student's insistence on wearing a hat against the teacher's wishes may create an atmosphere of tension that affects other classroom interactions).

Technical Core of Instruction. This category represents the type(s) of immediate and/or specific instructional information students are given and teachers give during classroom instructional periods. It focuses specifically on classroom/academic instructional feedback, activities, interactions, and evaluation. This category also looks at how instruction is presented (e.g., task development, directions and instructions). Matters of curriculum content and learning activities are also considered here.

Structure of the Learning Environment. This category includes information regarding the physical ecology of the classroom/school climate/culture, classroom organizational structure, and daily rules, routines, and rituals of the classroom environment.

Discipline and Classroom Management. This category includes procedures necessary to establish and maintain an environment in which instruction and learning occur. Characteristics of this category would be time spent by teachers in the classroom managing behaviors versus teaching; management of classroom activities; use of rules and classroom procedures; and type and nature of feedback given following misbehavior.

Perception of Classroom Life. This category covers perceptions of classroom life held by students and classroom teachers. Included in this category are issues pertaining to student and teacher classroom attitudes, aspirations, and schooling expectations. Gleaned from this category are the student's and the teacher's receptiveness, acceptability, and/or rejection of the classroom context. The category also specifies three reference-point dimensions of perception: self vs. others, teacher vs. student, and academic vs. behavior adjustment.

The three levels, or perspectives, from which these categories were viewed were general, culture, and language. Sub-categories for each of the five categories were formulated and defined at each level in order to refine and lend precision to the coding scheme and later analyses.

General Coding

The general coding scheme provides a means of classifying all the data in the protocols by taking each observational unit in a given protocol and placing it within one or more of the five broad categories. Using a "G" for "general" before the number representing the category, the data were coded as follows: social/psychological interactions (G1); technical core of instruction (G2); structure of the learning environment (G3); discipline and classroom management (G4); and perception of classroom life (G5).

Two coders conducted the general coding with an inter-rater reliability reported at .94. The high agreement between the two coders certified not only the method of observation, but the method of coding the data.

Cultural Coding

The cultural coding scheme was used to analyze observations for any behaviors and/or expressions identified as cultural in reference to the following ten fundamental cultural dimensions:

1) Movement
2) Verve
3) Affect
4) Orality
5) Communalism
6) Individualism
7) Competition
8) Object-Orientation
9) Cognition>Affect
10) Bureaucracy Orientation

These ten cultural dimensions reflect Afro-cultural (first five) and Mainstream (second five) cultural themes. Initial analyses were conducted of the prevalence and dynamics of three most frequently occurring Afro-cultural and Mainstream themes. The three Afro-cultural themes were Movement (has to do with a premium placed on the interwoven mosaic of movement expressiveness, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm); Verve (has to do with a receptiveness to relatively high levels of physical or sensate stimulation; and Communalism (involves the fundamental interdependence of people). The three Mainstream cultural themes were Individualism (refers to one's disposition toward fundamental autonomy, independence, individual recognition, and solitude); Competition (the notion that one's focus is on doing better than others — in order for a participant to succeed, others must fail in some fashion); and Bureaucracy Orientation (concerned with the strict adherence to structured rules and regulations with a policy against deviation from sanctioned procedures).

Before the protocols were coded for cultural themes, they were segmented in codable units. A codable unit was designated as a singular observed act or piece of observed

information. Each piece of information was numbered sequentially. Coders read each unit to determine whether there was a cultural behavior or expression occurring in the classroom. The coding system was designed to identify the behavior or expression, whether the display was initiated by the teacher or the student(s), who responded to the display, whether the response, in turn, was positive or negative, and whether the response was affirmed or disaffirmed by either the student(s) or the teacher. Each of the observations was also coded relative to the five classroom dimensions.

Language Coding

The purpose of the language coding scheme was to identify the function and form of classroom communication in the context of the five categories of activities identified as constituting the ecology of the classrooms under study. The coders examined the protocols line-by-line for linguistic activity involving not only direct quotations of teacher and student speech, but observer reference to such speech.

The following codes were used to denote speakers: T=teacher, P=Principal, Pt=Parent, PA=voice from the public address system, Sg=Girl Student, Sb=Boy Student, SS=Several Students speaking at once. A virgule was used to distinguish the speaker from the person to whom the speech was directed (e.g., Sg/T indicated that a girl student was speaking to the teacher). Language that fell into the five categories and their components was coded as follows:

L1 – Social/Psychological Interactions. This included expressions of praise (PR), politeness (POL), caring (CAR), criticism (CRIT), sarcasm (SAR), familiarity (FAM), formality (FORM), Black English Vernacular (BEV), or another ethnic language (ETHN). An example of coding in this category would be the following: If the teacher said "Mary, I like the way you are helping your friend," the observer would code the passage L1-T/SgPR.

L2 – Technical Core of Instruction. This involved coding the language used by teachers and students during the presentation of lessons. It required coding Initiations (I), Responses (R), and Evaluations (E), the types of questions asked (QWHO, QWHAT, QWHEN, QWHERE, QWHY, QHOW), procedure (PROC), content (CONT), and extraneous matters (EXTR). An example of coding in this category would be as follows: The teacher starts a lesson with the question, "Who was the first president of the United States?" The observer would code the passage L2-T/SS/I/QWHO. If a girl asked the teacher, "What page are we on?", the recorder would code the text as L2-Sg/T/I/PROC, indicating that a girl student has initiated a statement relevant to a procedure.

L3 – Learning Environment in the Classroom. The coder recorded language pertaining to rules (RU), rituals (RI), the physical layout (PHY) of the room, announcements from the public address system (PA), visitors (VI), other teachers (OTs), and the principal (P). An example of coding in this category would be as follows: If the teacher said, " Let's line up to go to the lavatory now," the observer would code the statement L3-T/SS/RI.

L4 – Discipline and Classroom Management. The teacher's oral forms of addressing disciplinary problems were coded as expressions of admonition (ADM), punishment (PUN), or threats (THRET). The following text would be coded in this way: "James, stop talking out loud..." (L4-T/Sb/ADM) "...and go stand in the corner" (L4-T/Sb/PUN).

L5 – Perception of Classroom Life. Perceptions (PER) and attitudes (ATT) were coded as being positive (POS), negative (NEG), or neutral (NEU). Expectations were coded as high (EXP/H) or low (EXP/L). An example of language coding in this category would be as follows: "T: John, you're going to end up repeating this grade," the observer would code the statement L5-T/Sb/EXP/L.

Student Focus Group Analysis

Focus group interviews were conducted with students to obtain "insider" knowledge of the school experiences and daily routines and the perspectives of low-income African-American elementary school students.

Participants

Thirty-seven low-income African-American elementary school children in grades one through six participated in the focus group discussions. The students were from a local Washington, D.C. public elementary school that had a predominantly African American student body. Six focus group interviewers were employed.

Formulation of Focus Group Questions

The focus group questions are based on the five conceptual classroom dimensions that guide the theoretical thrust of the project. The questions were refined and restructured through pilot focus group interviews. The first group of questions attempts to illuminate students' perceptions of social/psychological issues that are salient in the classroom environment (Example: "What is your teacher like?"). The second group of questions looks at students' perceptions of the technical core of instruction — academic interaction, instructional feedback and evaluation, teaching strategies, and how teachers present lessons to the students in the

classroom environment (Example: "What does the teacher say and do when students in your class give correct answers?"). The third group of questions addresses students' perceptions of the actual structure of the learning environment in the classroom (Example: "What are the important rules in your classroom?"). The fourth group focuses on questions pertaining to students' perceptions of the discipline and classroom management that teachers employ (Example: "How does your teacher encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior?"). The fifth group of questions focuses on the students' attitudes, aspirations, and expectations concerning their classroom life (Example: "Do you like your classroom and why?"). There was a total of seventeen questions.

Procedures

Focus group interviews were conducted by three two-person teams. Each team conducted four interviews. Two interviews were done at each grade level (1-6). One interviewer acted as the moderator who asked the questions to the students and the other was the assistant moderator who was in charge of videotaping, audio taping, and note taking during the interview session. There were approximately an equal number of students in each of the focus group sessions. Children in a given interview session were all from the same grade and classroom.

Prior to the beginning of the focus group discussions, the interviewers became acquainted with the students in each of the groups by talking casually with them. Each group was then greeted with the following welcoming statement:

> Good morning/afternoon. My name is (state your name) and this is (state your assistant moderator's name). We are from Howard University. We are here to ask you some questions about how you feel about your classroom experiences. This is not a test, so relax. There are no right or wrong answers. We are going to videotape, record, and write what you say so that we won't miss anything. We want you to know that all this information will be held in strict confidence. This means that your principal, teachers, parents, or classmates will not be told any of this. Please do not discuss this information with your classmates until tomorrow. Let's begin.

Following the welcoming statement, interviewing began. The questions were not directed to or at a particular student. The students were expected to respond in no particular order. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Once a given interview was completed, a debriefing session with the students commenced. The research team transcribed the taped interviews.

Results — General Coding of Classroom Observations

1. In the social/psychological sphere, the following preliminary conclusions were reached:

a. Personality and demeanor of the teacher are a major factor in setting the tone for the classroom on any given day. This refers to the degree of approachability of the teacher, the teacher's manner of speaking and his or her tolerance for movement and noise. These characteristics are often evidenced by the extent to which the teacher boosts or lowers students' morale and sense of self-worth and the teachers' manner of socializing students in acceptable social behavior.

b. Teachers place substantial emphasis on time and time management. "It is time to turn in your papers." "It is time to go to the bathroom."

c. Some teachers try to create cooperative spirits in the children by saying things like "We are a community." "Don't sit alone, find a group to join."

d. There is a "cult of quietness" being perpetuated by the teachers in the classroom: "I don't want any talking out loud." Students resist this and are constantly being told to be quiet.

e. Some teachers assume the "care-giving" role with students, inquiring into their personal lives ("Did you eat this morning?") and giving advice on personal habits. Students appear to accept this role.

f. Students engage in social talk and move around the room interacting with their peers despite the teachers' insistence that they desist from these activities.

The following examples of the social/psychological category are taken directly from the observation protocols.

> *Protocol #30; Page 3; Lines 56-61:* Students continue to work on their assignments. There is some moving around and interaction with other students. One student is up and at the front of another's desk. The teacher is talking with a young woman who just came in the room. More students start to move around and interact with other students. The woman leaves the room.
>
> *Protocol #37; Page 2; Lines 72-75:* The teacher is talking to a girl alone. She is rocking from side to side while listening to the teacher with her head down. She walks away and the teacher tells her to sit back in her seat. "Andrew, at your desk, son" the teacher says to another student. "You work better by yourself."

2. Some of the salient findings in the technical core of instruction category are as follows:

a. During group learning activities, there appear to be fewer disciplinary problems than *during individual learning activities.*

b. Instructional procedures are established early in the year and students are required to remember these procedures throughout the year. Examples of such procedures are: when to sit on the carpet, how and when to turn in homework assignments, and whether or not to ask permission to sharpen pencils.

c. Instructional feedback to students is generally positive and occurs on a regular basis. Examples of comments include: "You all did a good job." "I love the way Kelli is helping Leonard with his work."

d. Teachers typically make the assumption that all children are on the same instructional level. They do not make provisions for individual differences.

e. Students seem to ignore noise from the hallways and interruptions from the classroom intercom system and remain focused on academic activities taking place in the classroom.

f. It does not appear that the students engage in much critical or reflective thinking. Instructional learning activities are more teacher-directed.

g. Instructional time frame is a preoccupation with teachers. Lessons are presented relative to a specific time frame and students are responsible for working within the prescribed time limitations.

Examples of the technical core of instruction category taken directly from the observational protocols are as follows:

> *Protocol #11; Page 3; Lines 18-20/ Protocol #30; Page 5; Lines 115-116:* Children are paired in groups of two working on a story. The teacher shouts and tells the students "this is called buddy reading." Children are reading silently and working individually while the teacher is monitoring the room. The teacher states "Raise your hands when you are finished. Then you will get your reading books and have silent reading." A few hands go up and stay up while others are finishing. The teacher goes over to the ones whose hands are up and examines their work and tells them whether they can proceed. Those who finished put their books away and get their readers and a sheet of paper from the floor and return to their desks.
>
> *Protocol #27; Page 2; Line 31:* Students have a certain time to finish an assignment. "O.K., the five minutes are up. Put your work in the tray." Students

proceed to put sheets in a case filled with trays. Teacher yells at student for not following directions. "Only people who can follow directions can guide other people."

3. The structure of the learning environment represents information on the physical ecology of the classroom, classroom organizational structure, and daily rules, routines, and rituals of the classroom environment. The following trends were observed:

a. The classroom environment is a positive one in terms of the physical configuration of the classroom (i.e., pictures on the walls).

b. There is often an abundance of classroom routines and rituals with which students must be familiar and obey or be disciplined. They are typically written in a strategic location in the classroom so students can familiarize themselves with them on a daily basis.

c. There are constant interruptions from outside of the classroom such as others coming in to have conversations with the teacher, announcements from the intercom system throughout the day, and noise from the hallway.

d. Students are in lines or in some form of an orderly stance in the classroom.

Examples of the structure of the learning environment taken directly from the protocols are as follows:

> *Protocol #27, Page 1, Line 1:* (Physical Environment) There is one computer in the back corner, three large windows and one blackboard on the wall at the front wall, one TV mounted on the wall at the front, many items on the walls and partitions.

> *Protocol #11; Page 3; Lines 82-90:* (Daily Activity) Bathroom break. "Lets see who is ready. What student is ready?" Students are seated quietly with heads on desks before being asked to line up. All line up at attention at the front door. Teacher escorts students to the bathroom with cups in hand. All girls return and line up at the door. Boys return. Students get cups and line up again at the door. They proceed by twos (one boy/one girl) to the water fountain with cups. Once finished, students are told to be seated on the floor for next assignment.

4. Findings in the discipline and classroom management category indicate that teachers engage in a range of discipline and classroom management techniques. The following are some common trends:

a. Some modes of disciplining and managing in the classroom are nonverbal. Some of the nonverbal techniques that teachers use are turning lights off and on, standing in

silence until students are quiet, taking time out, and having students put their heads on their desks.

b. Some of the verbal forms of disciplining entail telling students to sit down or to be quiet and threatening to tell parents, or the principal, or to remove anyone who misbehaves from the classroom.

c. Again, the time rules must be obeyed or students are disciplined.

d. Teachers also use time-out techniques such as telling everyone to freeze and be still until there is silence or the teacher turns off the lights to obtain order in the classroom.

Examples of the discipline and classroom management category taken directly from the protocols are as follows:

> *Protocol #27; Page 2; Lines 20-22:* There are a variety of tasks going on at the same time and a variety of interactions. Some students are moving around and talking among themselves. The teacher says "O.K., a lot of you all are playing and you are going to spend recess with me tomorrow. I want everyone back at your seats."
>
> *Protocol #30; Page 4; Lines 100-104:* Students gather up their work and put work in the box. Students are talking and interacting when going to and from the box. The teacher says, " Excuse me, there is too much talking. I told you to be quiet."

5. The perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of the teachers and students in the classrooms were difficult to capture through observation, but the following trends were apparent:

a. Some teachers exhibit expectations of success for their students with expressions such as "My beautiful and intelligent African-American students."

b. It was clear that teachers expected the students to obey the classroom rules and to respect and obey the teacher and other designated students.

Results — Cultural Coding of Classroom Observations

Examining the targeted three Afro-cultural and three Euro-cultural fundamental themes, several trends worthy of note have been identified. Overall, the Afro-cultural themes occurred with substantially less frequency than the Euro-cultural themes.

Movement

There is a notable occurrence of coder observations of Movement in the classroom, but these occurrences generally invoke a negative response from the teacher. In the majority of observations of Movement, the typical scenario is that a child displays a propensity towards Movement and/or Movement Expressive behavior in the classroom (i.e., moving around and/or dancing in seat while waiting for something to do or while doing work; quietly singing or humming and/or rocking his/her head or body to the beat; or thumping his/her pencil or hand on the desk rhythmically); the teacher verbally responds to the student negatively, such as to reprimand the student and often telling him/her to sit down and be still while he/she is in class.

Examples of the cultural behavior/expression of movement taken directly from the observation protocols are as follows:

All students are participating, singing, and doing hand movements.

Boy is playing drums with pencil and book.

Boy starts doing slow running man with hand up trying to answer question.

Verve

Verve was the least observed cultural theme in the elementary school classrooms. Of the occurrences that were observed, they were mostly occurrences initiated by students. Examples of the cultural expression of Verve found in the observation protocols include:

Mr. Williams put the radio on such that there is music playing in the background.

Students doing many different things — walking, talking, reading, writing.

They talk amongst themselves as they work.

Communalism

Almost all occurrences of Communalism are accounted for in the occurrence of group work and/or group activities in the classroom, but there is no evidence in the context of the occurrences which suggests the underlying motivations for engaging in the group activities and work groups. In terms of our definition of Communalism, however, the motivation for working with other people is what determines whether the behavior or expression is actually a display of Communalism. Consequently, verifying that the group-based displays are indeed

communal in nature is difficult at best. Examples we believe to be consistent with the cultural expression of Communalism found in the observation protocols include:

> Children at group tables are helping each other.
>
> A group of four at another corner are helping each other with words (then told by the teacher to return to their desks).
>
> The teacher says, "Believe it or not, this is not group work. Are you finished?" (in response to students talking to each other).

Individualism

Displays of Individualism can be accounted for in the following scenarios of observed occurrences:

> Teacher: "Now I expect a 100% on your papers. Your code will be CFSH. Now this is a critical skill. This assignment is an assessment, not cooperative learning. It is independent. Don't let me see you look on your neighbor's paper."
>
> Teacher: "Independent meaning do it alone."
>
> Teaching assistant says, "You cannot do her work for her. She has to learn to write her own name. Let her do it by herself."

Competition

The occurrences of Competition were of two types: Interpersonal Competition and Group Competition. Although the majority of observations were of Interpersonal Competition, there were frequent occurrences of Group Competition also. A majority of the occurrences were in contexts which were created by the teacher.

The usual occurrence involved Interpersonal Competition as a behavior within the context of instruction whereas the teacher has the students raise their hands to be recognized by the teacher. The students must vie for the recognition of the teacher, because not all students will be called on by the teacher. The winner is the student who is called on.

Students are broken into groups whereby one group is competing against another on some assignment, project, or activity. The motivation for doing well is that one group isn't outperformed by the other group.

There were several occurrences observed where students showed displeasure and disdain in not being called on by the teacher. One boy got up and marched out of the room, talking about not being called on by the teacher. Another girl started crying because she wasn't called on by the teacher.

Examples of this cultural expression from the protocols include:

> Children are raising their hands and the teacher says she will choose the student "who is sitting up nice and tall."
>
> Teacher: "First boy to get a right answer gets his things to go home."
>
> The two teachers talk about how well behaved and nice they are and all the good things that they get to do. "You are more organized and cooperative than the fifth grade students and that's why you get to do all these things. The third graders are the envy of the school because of all the things they get to do, and all the places they get to go."

Bureaucracy Orientation

This dimension accounts for the largest number of observances of cultural behaviors and expressions. There were some trends in this area as well.

The usual pattern was for teachers to negatively respond to students verbally in reference to not following classroom rules (i.e., no talking — to anyone — without being recognized by the teacher; no getting out of your seats without permission; no shouting out answers without raising hand and being recognized).

There was a large occurrence of interruptions in the classroom activities by announcements coming over the intercom in the classrooms, usually by school administrators.

Examples of the cultural expression of bureaucracy from the protocols are:

> Announcement comes on the intercom; it is the principal: "Please excuse the interruption..." He asks for someone to come down to the office.
>
> Teacher says, "We only have five minutes until they call us to the auditorium. So finish up. Save your scores. Okay folks, I need my machines down in one minute."
>
> Teacher: "I'm giving you your test to do; do not touch it. I'm turning it over so you cannot see it. Do not touch it. This is your vocabulary test. I am gonna put the timer on and you have ten minutes to do it. Ten minutes is more than enough time to do this."

In general, results thus far show that the themes we have associated with mainstream cultural ethos such as individualism, competition, and bureaucracy orientation are more prevalent than those associated with Afro-cultural themes such as communalism, movement, and verve. In addition, we observed that the mainstream themes are more likely to be manifested in teacher initiated expressions than in student initiated expressions. Subsequently, when Afro-cultural themes are manifested, they are overwhelmingly initiated by students.

Results — Language Analyses

The observation protocols were analyzed for language usage in two phases. The first phase was for the purpose of describing the actual language used in the categories identified as the five dimensions of classroom life. The second phase was to identify language that promoted the cultural themes asserted by Boykin and others in the culture coding facet.

In the first analysis, certain themes emerged that ran across the five categories and across the six elementary school grade levels. They were (1) the role the teacher's language played in setting the tone of the class for the entire day; (2) the use of affective language; (3) the teachers' tendency to code-switch between Standard and Vernacular English; and (4) an emphasis on time.

Setting the Tone for the Day

The following teacher began the day encouraging cooperative work, maintained discipline in a quiet, unthreatening manner during the day, and ended the day on an upbeat note:

T1 (Grade 1): We are a community here.
This is Buddy Reading.
All quiet people raise your hands.
Enjoy life!

This is in contrast to another teacher (T2, Grade 1) who began the day reprimanding the students, continued by using sarcasm and then giving an authoritarian command, and ending the day with threatening language:

T2(Grade 1): Get back into your seats and stay there!
Shut your mouth. I'm sick of you kicking people and stuff.
Just get water and get back to your seat.
I said boys. Who is not sure if they are a boy or a girl?
Shut up! I'm sick of it!

A lot of you are playing....You know what happens to you tomorrow?

Whether a teacher's language is positive or negative appears not to be a function of grade level; thirteen of the twenty teachers whose classes were observed (65%) could be interpreted as setting a positive tone in their classrooms. The percentage of positive to negative was about the same across grade levels.

Affective Language

Although the literature suggests that there is a paucity of affective language in the classroom (Cazden, Johns, and Hymes, 1972), we found a significant amount of it. As might be expected, the use of affective language was observed most frequently in the social/psychological general category. It was also found in the technical core of instruction category, however, in the form of evaluation of students' responses during lessons. The following are some examples of both kinds of usage:

(1) as "caregiver" language, considered to be a part of teacher talk:

T(Grade 1): Did you eat this morning? (Then, to affirmative response) Thank God.
T(Grade 1): Do you know the answer, Sweetheart?
T (Grade 4): Excuse me, Son.

(2) in boosting students' self-concepts:

T (Grade 2): Good Morning, Smart Students.
T (Grade 2): I would like all my intelligent African American men to line up.
T (Grade 1): Be proud of who you are.

(3) in evaluating students' work:

T (Grade 1): Give yourself ten sweet pats on the back!
T (Grade 1): That boy is using his head.
T (Grade 1): This child is ready for Howard University.
T (Grade 3): I like the way you are tracing those letters
T (Grade 3): I like the way you raise your hand.
T (Grade 3): Praise the Lord.

The "Morning Meeting" intervention in these elementary school classrooms provided the unique opportunity for the children to express their feelings and to initiate conversation. The literature indicates how few such opportunities exist in most classrooms (Mehan, 1985).

It was in the Social/Psychological category, during Morning Meeting, that students initiated conversation most frequently:

S: Can I tell about my uncle? (girl student asked)
S: (To poor response on the part of classmates) That was a pitiful clap.
S: Let's do that again.

It was also in this category that socialization by the teacher into acceptable middle-class behavior was most frequently heard:

T(Grade 1): I don't think little girls sit like that.
T(Grade 1): Is that the way you say it?... Don't talk to him like that.

Code Switching

Teachers were noted to switch between Standard English and Vernacular usage. The switch from Standard English to Vernacular occurred in all general categories, from Social/Psychological to Perceptions of the Learning Environment. Some examples include:

T1: (To a parent) Girl, I'm so glad to see you.
T: (Evaluating a student's work) Go ahead, Girl!
T: (To the whole class) Freeze!
T: She is already on the edge, on Monday she will be on the ledge.
T: No, no. You ain't slick.
T: Don't move. Freeze!
T: Praise the Lord. Did that really happen?

There were times, however, when the same teachers would insist upon the students' usage of Standard English:

T1: Whose doll is that with glue in its hair?
S: Ain't no glue in its hair.
T1: What did you say?
S: It is no glue in her hair.

The Time Factor

Concerns about time dominate teachers' language at all grade levels and particularly in the Technical Core of Instruction and Structure of the Learning Environment categories. During lessons, students are constantly being reminded of time constraints and told to hurry:

T (Grade 1): Joseph, you are not working fast enough.

T (Grade 1): I am going to put the timer on and you have ten minutes to do it (a vocabulary test).

T (Grade 2): Now take out your papers. You have fifteen minutes, that is all I will allow you.

T (Grade 3): I'll give you about five more minutes.

T (Grade 3): Now is the time to ask for help, so we don't have to wait on you so much.

T (Grade 6): Let's go folks! In one minute I want my computers up and working.

Routines are set for specific times:

T (Grade 1): It is time to go to the bathroom.

T (Grade 2): This is the time to sharpen pencils.

T (Grade 3): It is time to listen to the announcements.

The observation of teachers' preoccupation with time and its constraints led us into the second phase of our language analyses which focused on cultural values that teachers reinforce in the classroom. We could hear the Puritan ethic that taught that time was money being reinforced throughout the day. Having postulated that African American children bring a kind of cultural capital into the classroom that often is at variance with the cultural characteristics of their teachers, we examined the classroom observation protocols to look at ways in which the communication styles in these classrooms supported those cultural disparities.

As postulated by Boykin and Miller (1997), the predominant mainstream cultural themes that are perpetuated in the classroom are bureaucracy orientation, individualism/independence, constraints on movement, and a cognitive orientation. Polarized to these themes are the Afro-cultural themes which many of the children bring into the classroom, such as affect, communalism, movement orientation, orality, and verve.

Our language analyses of Mainstream- versus Afro-cultural themes identified in the observation protocols were conducted on three levels: socio-linguistic speech, grade level, and speaker. Results from these analyses suggest that the cultural themes that present themselves most frequently in the classrooms under study are bureaucracy orientation, individualism, competition, constraint on movement, and orality. They could be seen across grade levels and across the dimensions of classroom life. Bureaucracy orientation provided the greatest number of occurrences, partially because of the breadth of its definition. Findings in this category were, therefore, sub-categorized as follows: (1) general displays of the impersonal, mechanical nature of rules and routines; (2) preoccupation with time; and (3) demonstrations of power and

control. Teachers, whose speech dominates in the classroom, demonstrated the predominance of Anglo- over Afro-cultural themes. On the other hand, many examples of affect were also found in the language of teachers in these classrooms.

These analyses support the initial postulation that mainstream cultural themes are prevalent in the classrooms that were observed. The fact that teacher talk dominates over student talk became apparent as we began to look at cultural characteristics. Such teacher talk involved the following:

admonitions against movement — "Sit up in your chair!" "Just get water and get back in your seat."

encouragement of competition — "Okay, let's have the girls against the boys" and from the teacher's question: "What did the poster session teach you?" students answered in unison, "It taught us to compete."

preference for individualism — Despite the fact that students are asked to sit together and some teachers say things like, "We are a community here, "and "Help your classmate," we often noted such remarks (as repeated earlier): "This is constructive talk and people are working independently," and "I want you to help yourself."

bureaucracy orientation — This reveals itself in many ways. The imposition of time constraints over individual needs has been demonstrated above. Orders that come into the classroom from the head office through the intercom system ("No outdoor recess today"), the teacher asking a student "Do you have a late pass, or not?" and the many instructions requiring the teacher's permission to speak, move, talk, and so forth.

The significance of the above findings is not the discovery of what is actually said in the classroom, but in making teachers aware that what they say and the way in which they say it is a form of enculturation which may run in opposition to the cultural norms that students bring into the classroom. This often leads to either misunderstanding on the part of the student, or oppositional behavior — both of which interfere with the teaching and learning process.

Results — Videotape Analyses

Videotape analyses demonstrate various ways in which cultural themes are manifested in elementary school classrooms serving low-income African American children. The tapes also demonstrate the preponderance of mainstream cultural themes present in these classrooms. This finding is consistent with the findings of several other research studies. Many of the

examples of the Afro-cultural themes that were present came through in behaviors initiated by the students, as noted in our classroom observation results. Moreover, the notion of the "hidden curriculum" was prevalent. Specifically, in this analysis of the cultural dynamics of classroom life, it was shown that there is more going on in these classes than academics. Students are being taught, consciously and unconsciously, what the appropriate ways of behaving and learning are. In light of the findings of various other research studies which have shown that African American children prefer the Afro-cultural themes, while their teachers prefer and endorse the mainstream cultural themes, it is imperative that, at this point, we begin to explore the consequences, or implications, of this apparent cultural mismatch in those schools serving predominantly African American children from low-income backgrounds.

Summary — Verve Video Segments

Three dimensions of verve have been identified as it is manifested in the lives of African-Americans: (a) the intensity or liveliness of stimulation in one's behavior; (b) the amount of variability, changeability, or alternation among activities or stimuli in one's environment; and (c) the density or number of stimulus elements or activities simultaneously present in one's environment. The Verve video segments depict many examples of multiple activities taking place in the classroom simultaneously:

students working with the teacher at her desk
a group of students watching the video tape
the science center in the corner for students and the teacher aide
one student working at the computer
students working at their desks on their individual assignments
a group of students working in a reading group lesson with the teacher

Summary — Movement Video Segments

The Movement video segments show many examples of students engaged in rhythmic movement patterns while engaged in the lesson, evidence of what we refer to as "a rhythmic orientation toward life." Although these segments do not show any teacher responses, previous research has shown that these displays of movement are usually discouraged and negatively responded to by teachers.

Summary — Bureaucracy Orientation Segments

In one Bureaucracy Orientation segment, the teacher is shown displaying a preoccupation with time, where time delimitations become more important than the completion of the current learning activities and processes taking place among the students. In another segment, the concerns of the office staff take precedence over the classroom instruction taking place. The office staff interrupts the classroom instruction and activities taking place by using the school's P.A. system to communicate with the teacher about a parent wishing to meet with the teacher.

Results — Analyses of Focus Group Interviews

Grades 1 and 2 Focus Group Interviews

In the social/psychological category, the responses given by the students dealt mainly with whether or not the teacher or students in the class were nice or mean. In the technical core of instruction category, students did not give a great deal of insight into the learning strategies and activities promoted and utilized in the classroom. It was clear, however, that the students perceived the teachers as being very supportive of them and assisting them when they were having problems with their school work. It was also clear that the students were encouraged to help each other when they were having difficulty.

In terms of the structure of the learning environment, many responses dealt with daily routines and classroom rules. The rules seemed to include such things as no running, no talking without permission or when the teacher is talking, no cheating, no hitting each other, no throwing away trash like it is a basketball. The rules that were enforced were handed down by the teacher. The rules were taught either by the teacher or by more experienced students to the new students. The routines were such things as first morning work, then followed by morning meeting, followed by the instruction for the day. In the discipline and classroom management category, the responses revealed that speaking freely was discouraged and when it occurred, students were punished. There was a preference for a quiet and orderly environment, but students admitted that they often ignored the teacher's requests for a quiet classroom and for no walking around the room. Good behavior was supported with the use of rewards and incentives such as candy and certificates.

In the perception of classroom life category, students said they really enjoyed school and were positive about their experiences with their teacher. They enjoyed coming to school

and felt positive about themselves as a result of being in the class. Their professional aspirations included doing police work, and becoming doctors, lawyers, and firemen.

Grades 3 and 4 Focus Group Interviews

In the social psychological category, the students stated that they liked school, their classmates, and their teacher, especially when the teacher said things such as "Well done, my intelligent students." In the technical core of instruction category, students discussed learning materials that their teacher used, such as blocks for mathematics. Computers were in the classroom for the students to use for activities. In the discipline and classroom management category, students revealed that when they misbehaved they received more homework or classwork. The structure of learning environment responses revealed that the students' seats often were arranged into groups. The students were cognizant of the rules in the classroom as a result of the teacher introducing them in the beginning of the school year. Students also stated that they reminded each other of the rules, especially if they saw a classmate breaking the rules. Students' perceptions of their classroom life revealed their appreciation of their teachers for the extra effort that they put forth for them.

Grades 5 and 6 Focus Group Interviews

The students revealed, consistent with other students' responses in the social psychological category, that their teacher was nice and creative, and that she made learning fun. The students in the class boosted each other's confidence and did not disagree often. In the technical core of instruction category, students said that they played academic-related games and they did experiments and board work. Teachers would often put problems on the board to make them more understandable for the students. Teachers often praised the students when answers were correct by saying, "very good" or giving students treats. When answers were incorrect, teachers were said to give hints or say "no" nicely and then ask another student.

In the structure of the learning environment category, students described the physical configuration of their classroom. Students stated that they did work in community groups and that desks were set up so that some of the hard-working students and not-so-hard-working students were placed in a group to work together. They also referred to many encouraging posters that were hanging on the walls. Moreover, the students indicated that rules were designated by the teacher and the students in the beginning of the school year, such as no fighting and respect for your peers. Every day, students go over African American history facts. Students revealed in the discipline and classroom management category that if they

misbehaved the teachers put them in corners or sent notes home to parents. The students had positive perceptions of their classroom life. The students believed that the teacher and students helped each other learn and expected each other to do well.

Discussion

The Classroom Cultural Ecology project research team has made an initial step toward the development of a holistic conceptual approach to viewing the ecology of classrooms. Providing a holistic view of the classroom environment has been one of the most neglected areas in classroom and school research. This study has made strides toward examining the significance of the classroom ecology in an effort toward effective and meaningful school reform.

In discussing any data, the guiding principle must be the original purpose of the study and what the study is intending to accomplish. This investigation is intended to provide descriptive data on what goes on in elementary school classrooms that serve low-income African American children. While the underpinning theory is that learning does not happen in a vacuum, but takes place in a broad context of a myriad of factors present in the classroom, this investigation was not designed to prove a specific hypothesis, but rather to create descriptive understanding. The question of analysis was, therefore, not whether the data supported or negated a particular hypothesis, but rather, how best to describe the daily routines, activities, and perceptions of classrooms that serve low-income African American children. The five mutually interactive classroom dimensions that guided the project have proven to be very useful. This classroom taxonomy has allowed the team to look very comprehensively into how classrooms work and what daily activities, routines, and practices are operative in these classrooms. Moreover, the taxonomy has also allowed the team to systematize the daily routines, activities, and practices.

Various empirical indicators of the ecology of classrooms that serve low-income African American children have been identified. Specifically, analysis of the descriptive data has revealed a host of activities going on in these classrooms. Most of the activities, however, occur more predominantly around the first two categories — Social/Psychological and Technical Core of Instruction — and have been shown to manifest consistently across all grade levels. What we have gleaned from these findings is that we must look more closely at how social/psychological dynamics, such as personality characteristics, social interaction, mood, demeanor, and manner of speaking, and instructional dynamics, such as instructional presentation, feedback, activities, and perceptions, exert their influence on the classroom

learning and behavioral outcomes of low-income African American children.

Through focus group discussions, it seemed that the children perceive the school environment to be a positive one. This conclusion, thus far, has been consistent across all grade levels. Students also perceived that their teachers want to help them learn and succeed in the classroom. Although these perceptions are generally positive, the research team has reservations about some of these findings. Specifically, the focus group methodology did not allow for appropriate controls to ensure that we obtained a reasonably good representation of the schools' student population. To our knowledge, the students who participated in the focus group discussions were specially selected by their school to participate in our project. They were probably chosen because they were apt to convey positive school experiences. Moreover, the focus group questions appear to be in need of amending in order to render them more age appropriate for the younger children. We found that we had to probe the younger children more often than the older children. The team has recently corrected these flaws in the methodology. Subsequently, we have taken steps to ensure that appropriate controls for focus group discussion participation are in place so that a wider variety of students can be interviewed about their perceptions of their classroom environment. Moreover, we are in the process of revising the focus group questionnaire to make the wording more age appropriate. We have reduced the number of questions as well, so that we can obtain more in-depth responses to the most revealing inquiries.

All too often, efforts at school reform do not give sufficient attention to the existing routines, practices, and perceptions that comprise the everyday ecology of classrooms. Our primary objective in this report is to share some preliminary descriptive documentation of findings regarding the instructional practices, routines, and perceptions that comprise the everyday classroom experiences in schools that serve African American children from low-income backgrounds. Our perspectives are not static. We continue to learn and familiarize ourselves with classroom practices, perceptions, and social routine issues as they continue to unfold. The research team intends to go into greater descriptive and analytical depth with the existing observational data set. For example, we will disaggregate the data set by grade level to see if there are age-related trends. We will more systematically quantify the observations to get more precise tallies of the relative frequencies of observational trends. We will also look more searchingly at the subcategories within the overall five dimensions to discern more specific trends in classroom ecology. Further, we will examine, systematize, and then integrate with the general coding scheme the observations coded for language functions and cultural themes. We will also gather more direct classroom observation data bearing on the five classroom categories mentioned throughout this report. This will allow the team to focus more earnestly on those dimensions of the classroom environment that will hopefully give us further

descriptive insights into the daily routines of classroom life in schools that serve low-income African American children.

There is a large, potentially heuristic value in illuminating the culture substrate and communication styles extant in the classroom context, especially in classrooms serving African American children from low-income backgrounds. The educational implications of such analyses are tremendous. If our goal is to ensure that all students are placed at promise and are not placed at risk, educators must confront the real issues that operate on a daily basis in their classrooms. The possibility of cultural "clashes" is a critical issue and the understanding of this phenomenon can help in the formulation of professional development activities for concerned teachers so they can be more aware of the integrity that children bring into the classroom and they can develop practices and perspective that lead to more culturally responsive pedagogy.

The implications for the findings concerning language usage in the classroom of students placed at risk are great. If the contribution of descriptive studies is to help formulate hypotheses rather than test them, as many scholars have asserted, we need to explore the questions that our data pose. For example, we might ask: What effect does affective language have in the classroom? Does it enhance or detract from the teacher/student relationship? What effect does it have on learning? Is code-switching an effective way of dealing with the disparity between standard and non-standard varieties of English? Do minority students have trouble understanding teacher talk? If teachers can be led to become more conscious of the effects of their usage of language on student learning, self-esteem, and general well-being, will this translate into better teaching and learning?

In our study, we have just begun to scratch the surface in these areas of culture and language. Our ultimate concern is how these findings in both areas can be translated into interventions that will benefit students placed at risk for educational failure, especially African-American children from low- income backgrounds, and their teachers.

References

Baratz, J., & Shuy, R. (1969). *Teaching Black children to read.* Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Boykin, A.W. (1994). *A talent development approach to school reform.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, April.

Boykin, A.W., & Miller, O.A. (1997). *In search of cultural themes and their expressions in the dynamics of classroom life.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March.

Burling, R. (1992). *Patterns of language: Structure, variation, change.* Academic Press.

Cazden, C.B., John, V., & Hymes, D. (1972). *Functions of language in the classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review, 58,* 280-298.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children.* New York: The New Press.

Flanders, N.A. (1970). *Analyzing teaching behavior.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Florino-Ruane, S. (1987). Sociolinguistics for educational researchers. *American Educational Research Journal, 24,* (2) 185-197.

Fuller, B., & Clark, P. (1994). Raising school effects while ignoring culture? *Review of Educational Research,* 64, 119-157.

Gramsci, A. (1988). *Prison letters.* Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, Inc.

Heath, S.B. (1978). *Teacher talk: Language in the classroom.* Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Henry, J. (1963). *Culture against man.* New York: Vintage Books.

Kaestle, P. (1983). *Pillars of the republic: Common schools and American society.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Korzybski, A. (1951) The role of language in the perceptual processes. In R. Blake & G. Ramsey (Eds.), *Perception: An Approach to Personality.* New York: The Ronald Press Co.

La Belle, T.J. (1972). An anthropological framework for studying education. *Teachers College Record, 73* (4).

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). Who will teach our children: Preparing teachers to successfully teach African American students. In E. Hollins, J. King, & W. Hayman (Eds.), *Teaching diverse populations.* Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press.

Manke, M. (1990). Constructing the power relationship: A study of two elementary school classrooms. Dissertation, Department of Education, University of Virginia.

Mehan H. (1985). The structure of classroom discourse. In D.T. Van (Ed.), *A handbook of discourse analysis.* London: Academic Press.

Sinclair, J., & Coulthard, R. (1975. *Towards an analysis of discourse*. London: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, O. (1978). Language issues and testing. *The Journal of Non-White Concerns*, April 1978, pp. 125-133.

Tharp, R. (1989). Psychocultural variables and constants: Effects on teaching and learning in schools. *American Psychologist, 44*, 349-359.

Tyack, D. (1974). *The one best system*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, thought and reality*, edited by John Carroll. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Wolcott, H. (1976). Criteria for an ethnographic approach to research in schools. In J. Roberts & S. Akinsaya (Eds.), *Schooling in the cultural context: Anthropological studies of education* (pp. 23-43). New York: David McKay Company, Inc.

CRESPAR

Johns Hopkins University
Center for Social Organization of Schools
3003 North Charles Street – Suite 200
Baltimore MD 21218
410-516-8800 / 410-516-8890 fax

Howard University
2900 Van Ness Street, NW
Washington DC 20008
202-806-8484 / 202-806-8498 fax